



## **Plymouth Information Advice and Support Service (PIAS) Impartiality Policy (Updated August 2018)**

In all our work we will seek to ensure that information and support given to; parents<sup>1</sup>, carers, children, young people and to professional workers is impartial. Understanding impartiality and how it is evidenced in practice has been, and remains, a core theme in the development of our service. This policy document sets out our thinking and practice with regard to impartiality. Plymouth Information Advice and Support for SEND's (PIAS) starting points for ensuring impartiality are:

- Attempting definitions of the word
- Understandings of factors that influence partiality and impartiality
- Raising awareness of key themes in PIAS practice
- Structures and organisational arrangements that reassure service users that the service is impartial

### **Definitions:**

Dictionary definitions include 'not partial, unprejudiced, fair' (OED); 'not favouring one person, etc., more than another; fair and unbiased' (Chambers); showing lack of favouritism; *the cold neutrality of an impartial judge*' (Webster's); 'free from undue bias or preconceived opinions; *an unprejudiced appraisal of the pros and cons, the impartial eye of a scientist*' (Webster's). Such definitions are helpful but one person's ideas of fairness, neutrality, or perception of the role of judge or scientist, may be another person's perceptions of demonstration of vested power, lack of understanding, or adherence to political beliefs or faith interests. The well - known saying '*Having no axe to grind*', essentially of not preparing either side for battle is pertinent here. Similarly, '*You can talk to me because I've got nothing to win and nothing to lose*'.

It may be productive to equally consider a definition of partiality, the absence of which seems essential to evidencing impartiality. The OED offers 'inclined antecedently to favour one party in a cause, or one side of the question more than the other', 'prejudiced or biased in someone's favour', and 'pertaining to or involving a part only'. We also like the OED's 'Partialism: a partial theory or

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document the word 'parent' is taken to include all those with a direct responsibility for parenting. These might be birth parents, step-parents, grandparents or other members of the family, foster or adoptive parents or other adult caregivers.

view which does not take into account all the facts. From these varied emphases, we currently synthesise a definition of impartiality as:

'Not taking sides, not favouring one point of view over another because of preconceived ideas or beliefs, and ensuring that all available facts, truths, opinions and perceptions are being shared openly.'

### **Factors that influence partiality and impartiality**

Being able to achieve impartiality in service delivery calls for professional awareness of many factors that may influence us, or any of the wide range of our service users, towards partial understanding of events or information. These might include:

1. Recognising the factors that can lead to people constructing different understandings of the same event. Examples could be:
  - *Previous experience of similar situations*
  - *Misunderstandings of the purpose of the event, differing agendas*
  - *Difficulties with language or other communications used during the event*
  - *Power differentials across participants*
  - *Interpreting requests for clarification or justification as confrontational or conflictual*
  - *Differing interpretation of meaning behind words*
  - *Limited time for an effective explanation to have been given by participants*
  - *Information overload and not being able to remember all that took place*
2. Recognising that differing perceptions of the same event are very real to each person concerned.
3. Understanding and being able to explain the difficulties that can arise from partial views of any given situation.
4. Recognising the links between honesty, impartiality and confidentiality.
5. Understanding that impartiality or partiality is demonstrated not only in the content of words used, but in body language, references to others that suggest affiliation or collusion, and communications that patronise the views of others.
6. Recognising that people pass through a series of stages in changing their attitudes, perceptions and willingness to contemplate alternative ways of understanding events and choices for the future. Sometimes there may be a need for high quality and impartial support for lengthy periods.

## **Key themes in PIAS practice**

Being able to achieve impartiality in service delivery also calls for awareness of frequent themes in PIAS practice and in supporting parents in diverse family and community settings, at differing stages of parenting, and in varied relationships with schools, Local Authority and other services. These might include:

1. To seek to resolve any conflict between the views of the school, the Local Authority or the parent, rather than to promote any of them.
2. To understand that a series of unplanned and unintended events (examples could be school / other agency staff absence, failure in telephone / email systems / postal delays, need for urgent prioritisation of other things, etc.) can conspire to convince a parent that the 'system' is against them.
3. To support parents, individually or collectively, to convey their views to schools, the Local Authority and other agencies.
4. To differentiate between advocacy, representation and information exchange. PIAS advocates only for parent participation in general and promotes and supports structures that enable representatives to convey collective views from parents. It does not act as advocate for any individual parent or act to represent an individual parent's views. It supports best practice in information exchange and will support individual parent's to ensure their views are understood by others and vice versa – on occasion this may include conveying a parent's view, at their request, where they feel unable to do so.
5. To recognise that confidentiality is a permissive phenomenon and that proactive, impartial exploration with a parent about which information can be shared can be constructive and effective in achieving solutions.
6. To both support parents and, as part of that process, to offer constructive challenge to perceptions of some events.
7. To understand that separating or separated parents may hold very partial views of events compared to each other.
8. To recognise that parents facing court proceedings, stressful procedures or meetings may present extremely partial perceptions.
9. To be authentic and honest in working with parents, not only listening and agreeing, but maintaining a well-informed reality frame from which to inform parents' choice and planning.

10. To avoid over-identification between a parent's situation or dilemmas and one's own personal experience.

### **Structures and organisational arrangements to evidence impartiality**

Lastly, PIAS must examine the structures, procedures and organisational arrangements it offers that evidence its impartiality in its delivery of service. These include:

1. Training and supervision of staff, including observed practice that explores all of the points in this section and includes looking at many examples of practice where impartiality has informed or underpinned the impact achieved.
2. Transparency about the relationship of the PIAS and the Local Authority, as set out in Section 1.2 of the Quality Standards for providing impartial information, advice and support and the SEN Code of Practice 2.4 and 2.5. Since 2003, when the then Parent Partnership was restructured to be a within-house arm's length service of the Local Authority, there has been agreement about anticipating and avoiding conflict between the Authority and PIAS in its delivery of service.
3. The PIAS is located to avoid any adverse perceptions of its impartiality. It is away from the Authority's main base at Windsor House and is based at Jan Cutting Healthy Living Centre. There is also a resource base at the centre for parents where books, DVDs and other information materials are available for loan.
4. PIAS has its clear service identity, its own logo, its own direct URL website, and provides a comprehensive range of publications to inform service users.